

The Parsha Discussion

TORAH TO DISCUSS WITH TEENS AND ADULTS AROUND YOUR SHABBAT TABLE

Vayishlach. Insignificant Verses – Really?

Our dramatic parsha ends with a long and arduous list of the genealogy of Esau and his clan. The family tree is written in painstaking detail over forty-three verses. It is difficult to fathom why the Torah expends such attention to Esau's progeny.



The Talmud brings the story of the idolatrous and blasphemous king of Judah - Manasseh:

“who examined Biblical narratives to prove them worthless. Thus, he jeered, ‘had Moses nothing to write but, “And Lotan's sister was Timna” (Gen 36:22); “And Timna was a concubine to Eliphaz”(Gen 36:12)?’

The verses that Manasseh mocked are taken from that list of Esav's genealogy in Chapter 36! But is he correct? What do these verses teach us? Are these verses worthless?

Interestingly, the Rambam in his Eighth Principle of Faith [Torah min Hashmayim - the divinity of the Torah] addresses these same verses:

“And there is no difference between verses like וּבְנֵי חָם כּוּשׁ וּמִצְרַיִם וּפּוּט וּכְנַעַן “And the sons of Ham were Cush and Mizraim, Phut and Canaan” (Genesis 10:6), or וּשְׁמֵם אִשְׁתּוֹ מֵהַטְּבַאל בַּת מַטְרֵד “And his wife's name was Mehatabel, the daughter of Matred” (Genesis 36:39), or מֵטְרַד “And Timna was concubine” (Genesis 36:12), and verses like אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ “I am the Lord thy God” (Exodus 20:2), and שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל “Hear, O Israel” (Deuteronomy 6:4). They are all equally of divine origin and all belong to the תּוֹרַת ה' תְּמִימָה טְהוֹרָה וּקְדוּשָׁה “The Law of God which is perfect, pure, holy, and true.”

Is “Shema Yisrael” equal to “And Timna was a concubine?”

Admittedly, Maimonides is addressing the divinity of the Torah and is saying that all the Torah is equal regarding its status as divine revelation. And yet, when we view the importance of these verses, we certainly do not chant “And Timna was a concubine” twice daily! Might the Rambam be undermining the very point he seeks to assert? – Though they have the category of revelation, the verses of the clan of Esav would certainly appear at first glance to be insignificant and trivial. Does it qualify as: “pure, holy and true”?

Challenged by the Rambam I began to investigate whether I could uncover some higher meaning to verse: “And Timna was a concubine”. I was quite surprised to find such a wealth of material on the topic. The interpretations are varied and rich. For me, this was a fascinating example of finding significance in every segment of Torah.

APPROACH 1. MAIMONIDES – GUIDE TO THE PERPLEXED

First – some context.

The Parsha Discussion

TORAH TO DISCUSS WITH TEENS AND ADULTS AROUND YOUR SHABBAT TABLE

"This is the line of Esau, the ancestor of the Edomites, in the hill country of Seir. Esau's sons: Eliphaz, the son of Esau's wife Adah; Reuel, the son of Esau's wife Basmat. The sons of Eliphaz were Teman, Omar, Zepho, Gatam, and Kenaz. Timna was a concubine of Esau's son Eliphaz; she bore Amalek to Eliphaz." (36:9-12)

Timna is Eliphaz's concubine. A concubine is a second-tier wife with fewer marital and financial rights and securities. She is the mother of Amalek. Furthermore, when describing the kings who ruled in Edom, we read another important detail:

"These are the sons of Seir the Horite, the inhabitants of the land: Lotan... and the sister of Lotan was Timna" (36:20-22)

So Timna, concubine of Eliphaz and mother of Amalek is the sister of one of the important Edomite warlords. She is related to the entire clan. As a result, Maimonides writes:

The list of the families of Seir and their genealogy is given...because of one particular commandment. God distinctly commanded the Israelites to blot out the name of Amalek (Deut. 25:17-19). Amalek was the son of Eliphaz and Timna, the sister of Lotan (Gen 36:12). The other sons of Esau were not included in this commandment. But Esau was by marriage connected with the Seirites, as is distinctly stated in Scripture: and Seirites were therefore his children: he reigned over them; his seed was mixed with the seed of Seir, and ultimately all the countries and families of Seir were called after the sons of Esau who were the predominant family, and they assumed more particularly the name Amalekites, because these were the strongest in that family. If the genealogy of these families of Seir had not been described in full they would all have been killed, contrary to the plain words of the commandment. For this reason the Seirite families are fully described, as if to say, the people that live in Seir and in the kingdom of Amalek are not all Amalekites: they are the descendants of some other man, and are called Amalekites because the mother of Amalek was of their tribe. The justice of God thus prevented the destruction of an [innocent] people that lived in the midst of another people [doomed to extirpation]: for the decree was only pronounced against the seed of Amalek. (Guide 3:50)

This is a fascinating proposal. It relates to the command to wipe out Amalek. The entire genealogy is included so that we not kill any individual erroneously. We have make a full investigation to ensure that if we ever enact the law of killing Amalek, that the individual is indeed part of that clan.

APPROACH 2: TIMNA, THE REJECTED CONVERT - TALMUD SANHEDRIN

A second, quite different narrative is offered by the Talmud in Sanhedrin 99b:

"... What is the purpose of the verse: "And Lotan's sister was Timna"? — Timna was a royal princess, as it is written, "Chief Lotan", "Chief Timna"; and each chief is a member of a monarchy, albeit without a crown. That is why they are called "chief" and not "king". Desiring to become a proselyte, she went to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but they did not accept her. So she went and became a concubine to Eliphaz the son of Esau, saying, 'I would rather be a handmaiden to this nation [the offspring of Abraham, including the son of Esau], and not a noblewoman of that nation [the chiefs of Esau]'. Amalek was descended from her; the nation that afflicted Israel. Why so? — Because they [Abraham, Isaac and Jacob] should not have rejected her."

The Parsha Discussion

TORAH TO DISCUSS WITH TEENS AND ADULTS AROUND YOUR SHABBAT TABLE

The Talmud is wondering why a princess in her own tribe, a sister of royalty, would become a concubine, hardly a elevated social status. The Talmud develops a narrative that this princess, Timna, wanted to join the family or religion of Avraham. She was rejected; it is never explained why she is shunned; the root of the name “Timna” is the verb מנ"ע which means “precluded” or “rebuffed”. She is so dedicated to the Abraham family that after she has been deflected by Abraham-Isaac-Jacob, she prefers to be a second-tier wife to the (deflected) line of Esau than to be a princess among her own.

The postscript here is that her son becomes Amalek, Israel’s perennial nemesis. The reality of Timna’s rejection, notwithstanding her strong personal attraction to the Abrahamic family, generates a profound reaction in her son, Amalek, such that he develops an antagonism that echoes throughout time. In this case, the deflection of a would-be convert gives birth to deep antipathy and sworn hatred.

Interestingly, Rashi spins this in a purely positive direction:

TIMNA WAS A CONCUBINE — This is stated to tell you in what importance Abraham was held — how eager people were to attach themselves to his descendants. This Timna was a descendant of chieftains, as it is said (v. 22) “And Lotan’s sister was Timna”, and Lotan was one of the chieftains inhabiting Seir — he was one of the Horites who had dwelt there from ancient times. She said to Eliphaz, “If I am unworthy to become your wife would that I might become your concubine!”

Please Discuss:

- The Rambam suggests that all verses in the Torah are somehow equal qualitatively. What do you make of this assertion?
- Obviously “Timna was a concubine” is not “Shema Yisrael!” On that basis, what do you make of the idea that all verses are equal?
- Interestingly we have presented two interpretations of “Timna was a concubine.” One (Rambam) explains how the text is there to facilitate the demise of Amalek. The other (Talmud Sanhedrin) explains how Amalek arrived at a state of malevolence towards the nation of Israel. It explains how Israel themselves triggered Amalek's hatred. What do you make of the disparity between these commentaries? Do either of these commentaries seem to get to the heart of the story of Timna the Concubine?

Shabbat Shalom!